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Student pharmacist perceptions of participation in hands-on naloxone counseling

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ABSTRACT

Background and purpose: Opioid overdose is a leading cause of death across the United States. Rho Chi Pharmacy Honor Society students at the University of Kentucky initiated a project to provide fellow students a volunteer opportunity to educate at-risk patients about naloxone using a physician-approved protocol. The goal was to improve student counseling skills by allowing them to apply knowledge learned during didactic and simulated training.

Educational activity and setting: Third and fourth year pharmacy students at the University of Kentucky voluntarily provided opioid overdose and naloxone counseling to patients at the health department and other locations. Students who counseled at the health department were asked to complete an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved, anonymous, electronic survey at the end to gauge their perceptions of the experience.

Findings: Thirty-five of forty-five participating students responded to the survey, indicating a 78% response rate. The results suggested that student comfort with naloxone counseling increased after real-world counseling, compared with their perceived comfort levels entering the experience. The majority of the respondents (77%, $n = 27$) reported a change in their personal views on drug addiction and the associated patient population. Ninety-one percent ($n = 32$) of students plan to pursue certification to dispense naloxone as part of their future pharmacy practice. Most (94%, $n = 33$) perceived the counseling experience as practical application of their didactic education.

Discussion and conclusions: As opioid addiction and accidental overdose plagues the nation, pharmacists are prepared to lead the battle against this disease. Pharmacy education and hands-on opportunities provide students with the practical knowledge and skills necessary to have impact on their patients and the opioid epidemic.

Background and purpose

Opioid abuse remains one of the most critical public health and safety issues facing the United States. The opioid epidemic has exacted a devastating toll on its victims, their families, and economic stability and growth of the community.^{1–3} The state of Kentucky is particularly vulnerable, as the number of fatal drug overdoses has climbed steadily over the past decade to more than 1,200 each year, many of which are caused by opioids. Many overdose deaths could potentially be prevented by the timely administration of naloxone, an opioid antagonist that blocks the activity of opioid drugs and reverses the deadly effects of an overdose. Pharmacists are uniquely positioned to provide education and dispense naloxone to patients, families, and first responders, as has been described previously.^{4,5} Further, the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy recently approved a policy statement that schools and

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colleges of pharmacy should “..equip student pharmacists, faculty, preceptors, and other practitioners with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to assist providers, patients, families, and caregivers with the challenges of effective pain management and the prevention and treatment of associated substance abuse disorders”.⁶ To this end, opportunities that further the education of student pharmacists in caring for patients who struggle with opioid misuse and their families are paramount in the effort to combat this devastating crisis.

In 2015, the legislature of the Commonwealth of Kentucky passed SB 192 that granted pharmacists, who received training and certification from the Kentucky Board of Pharmacy, the authority to initiate the dispensing of naloxone under a prescriber approved protocol. The development of the required training has been described elsewhere, but included specifically mandated elements of education: (1) Risk factors of opioid overdose; (2) Strategies to prevent opioid overdose; (3) Signs of opioid overdose; (4) Steps in responding to an overdose; (5) Information on naloxone; (6) Procedures for administering naloxone; and (7) Proper storage and expiration of naloxone product dispensed.^{4,8}

In 2016, faculty at the University of Kentucky, College of Pharmacy incorporated this training into the professional year 3 (P3) didactic and patient care lab curriculum such that every student is able to apply for naloxone-certification from the Kentucky Board of Pharmacy upon graduation.⁷ Although opportunities to provide hands-on opioid overdose prevention education may arise during students’ advanced pharmacy practice experience rotations, P3 students who received training had little opportunity to apply the newly-learned skills in real-world settings.

Educational activity and setting

The goal of this project was to provide students with real-world counseling experience that extend the didactic training and simulation exercises delivered in the P3 curricula⁷. Practical application was offered to P3 and fourth professional year (P4) students in our institution as part of the Rho Chi Pharmacy Honor Society Chapter Project. After training, students were able to volunteer under the supervision of a pharmacist at various venues in the community, including the health department, the police department, Hope Center, Shepherd House, Veterans Residential Program, and Revive Life House. Students provided counseling to both patients and providers on opioid overdose recognition and response and the use of naloxone. Students also assisted in the dispensing of naloxone by a physician-approved protocol. Educational materials used for this training comply with state regulations and are available upon request.⁸

We measured student experiences following the volunteer education and counseling opportunities using an anonymous, electronic survey instrument delivered to the students who participated prior to March 7, 2017 under an institutional Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved protocol. The five-question survey instrument contained two questions that asked students to gauge their comfort level of the experience on a ten-point scale and three free-response questions that addressed student opinions of substance abuse disorders, professional aspirations in naloxone counseling, and overall value of the volunteer service experience. The five-question survey is found in [Appendix 1](#).

Findings

Forty-five survey invitations were distributed using SurveyMonkey[®] (SurveyMonkey Inc., Palo Alto, CA) and thirty-five students provided responses to a one-time survey given at the end of the experience for a 78% response rate. Questions one and two addressed student comfort in counseling substance abuse patients before and after this volunteer opportunity, respectively. The average score prior to real-world naloxone counseling was 5.4 (SD = 2.4) and increased to 9 (SD = 1.4) after counseling experience. Responses from the final three questions were reviewed for and grouped by similar phrases determined by the authors. Question three was designed to evaluate student perceptions of drug addiction. Many respondents (77%, $n = 27$) felt that interactions during counseling sessions changed their views of drug addiction and the affected patient population. Question 4 was designed to gauge student interest in implementing naloxone education and counseling as a licensed pharmacist. Nearly all respondents (91.5%, $n = 32$) indicated that they plan to pursue naloxone certification and dispense naloxone as a licensed pharmacist. Question 5 aimed to evaluate whether participation in real-world naloxone counseling extended and reinforced education acquired in classroom experiences. Thirty-three students (94% of respondents) valued this experience as a practical application of classroom experiences in both the Public Policy and Health class and Patient Care Lab sequence (See [Appendix 2](#) for selected student responses).

Discussion

The students of the University of Kentucky, Rho Chi Pharmacy Honor Society sought to provide their peers with additional opportunities to understand the impact pharmacists and student pharmacists can have within the community by engaging in education and counseling around naloxone use. Pharmacists play an important role in improving patient care, enhancing medication safety, and promoting health and wellness. The 2016 Rho Chi chapter project was initiated to enable students to become involved in the community, refine their interpersonal skills, and provide a unique professional development opportunity. Community engagement by pharmacists and pharmacy students is critical to advancement of the profession and to improvement of healthcare.^{9,12} Specifically, efforts to bring education, counseling, and dispensing of the naloxone to the community correlate with reduction of deaths from overdose.^{2,10,11,13}

The organization and planning for this project began a year before its implementation. State funding was obtained by University of Kentucky Healthcare and was implemented by the Center for Advancement of Pharmacy Practice and college faculty members in various community sites. Classroom training was required in order for students to participate in the project. A risk management form

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